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ABSTRACT

This manual for school board members identifies the basic factors to take into account when dealing with the news media. These factors include knowing what kinds of media offer what kinds of coverage in the school district's local area and how to channel the right information to the media representative who can make the best use of it. Divided into sections on newspapers and broadcast media, the manual discusses both how to respond to questions from representatives of these media and how the board itself can initiate use of the media. An appendix provides a basic list of do's and don'ts for establishing good relations with the media, including how to approach the media, how to prepare the district's staff for responding to the media, how to prepare yourself, and how to look at the community when contemplating the release of information. (PGD)

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Work With the Media

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Foreword

The day you become a member of a board of education, those communications companies known collectively in our society as "The Media" may seem to take over your life as though you had signed a contract with them. Sometimes — particularly in the bigger cities that have competitive markets — it may feel as though they've turned on spot, flood and strobe lights all at once. It can affect you, your family, your friends, your business, or all of the above. It can feel good or be destructive, sometimes both in the same half hour. Some board members love the attention; others hate it. Either way, how you deal with media representatives will have a profound effect on your school district and every issue that comes up. There is a chemistry to communications, and the elements you pump into your communications program — or don't — will be reflected in your newspapers and on your airwaves and cable systems.

Interpersonal communication is as unique as the proverbial snowflake: No exchange of words between two people ever duplicates one between any other two people because the individuals' vocabularies, inflections, personal backgrounds, and attitudes produce personalized responses. As a matter of fact, the same two people can exchange the same dialogue on two different days and have different interpretations and reactions.

The chemistry of mass communications is often influenced by personal interactions between the individuals making the news and the individuals reporting it. Reporters who attend the same news conference may write stories stressing different points or carrying different shades of meaning. Their personal attitudes toward and knowledge about the topic at hand influence their reporting.

The better you know the idiosyncrasies of a chemical element, the more confident you feel about working with it. Recognizing and understanding the elements of communications can be an asset to you who want to learn to deal with the media or to do so more effectively.

This "how to" booklet is *not* meant to be used as a boards' chemistry text because the properties of the elements (individuals and communities and agencies) are unique to each board of education. The goal here is to identify some basic concepts and activities that will 1) start school board members thinking about their own media, and 2) be adaptable to local needs.

In addition to picking, choosing, discarding, adapting, elaborating on and adding to the thoughts in this booklet, board members are encouraged to

- See communicating with the media as just one aspect of a total two-way communications program, not as an isolated activity.
- Consciously work at developing and improving their communications skills, individually and as a group.
- Provide opportunities for their employees and community volunteers to strengthen their communications skills.
- Establish and maintain an ongoing, healthy rapport between schools and media representatives.
- Seek the help of school communications specialists before problems appear on the horizon.[1] Anticipation is an imperative part of the communications game — a part both board members and school administrators need to learn to play.

Underlying the suggestions in the pages that follow is a basic rule of boardsmanship: As a board member you must always remember that you are one member of a team. At no time is that point more important than when dealing with the media. As part of its formally adopted communications plan, your board should have clearly defined ground rules for its relationship with the media. Beyond that, however, you individual members must study the local media mix and exercise caution to uphold your responsibility to the team.

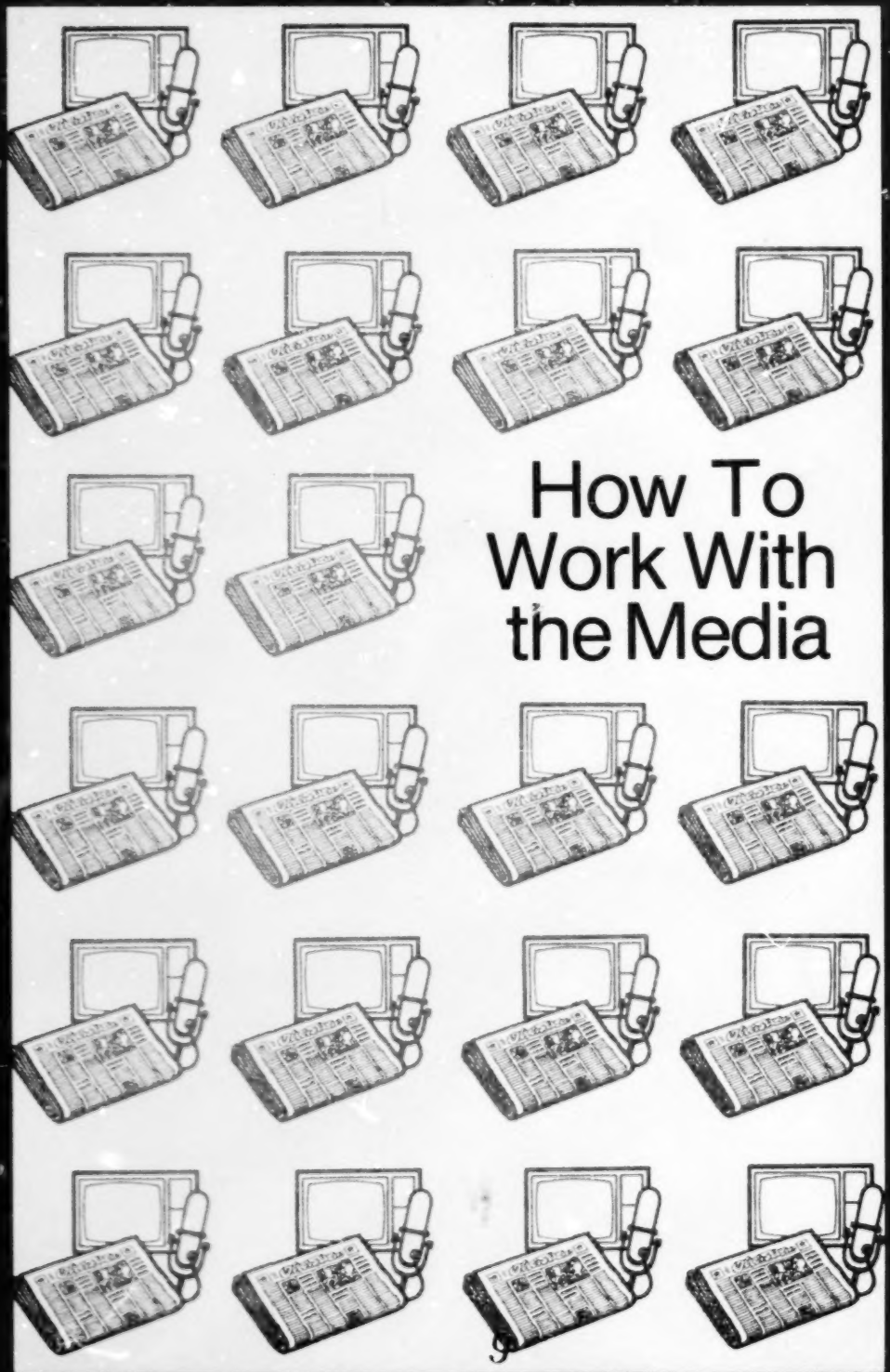
Your personal responsibility is to know the local media and to set the tone for a positive relationship. The collective board responsibility is to provide the guidelines and staff development opportunities necessary to establish and maintain such a relationship.

Also underlying the message of these pages is a basic truth of communications: Perception represents truth to your publics. You may be completely forthright, but if you are *perceived* as holding back, you may as well be guilty of doing so. Your schools may be doing a creditable job of educating students, but if the public's perception is that the schools are not succeeding, they will be seen as failing. One thoughtless individual comment such as, "I don't pay

[1]There are some good chemists. Why wait until the lab goes up in smoke? The National School Public Relations Association has chapters in both Northern and Southern California. The school/community Relations Foundation provides school communications specialists and helps find the money to pay for them. CSBA can help refer you to specialists in your area.

any attention to the media because it just upsets me," can plague a whole board with an image of insensitivity to public opinion. Such an image is anathema to public officials.

As adults are fond of reminding students, "There is no shortcut to success." Only an organized plan, continued efforts and hard work can establish an effective working relationship with your media representatives. Then it takes more of the same to maintain it.



How To Work With the Media

Introduction
Identify *Your* Media

"The Media" means something different to each of us. The seasoned board of education member who lives in San Francisco or Los Angeles can probably rattle off names, letters, channel numbers and anchorpersons of local, network, cable and UHF television stations, AM and FM radio call letters, dial location numbers, newspapers and names of reporters and editors. The L.A. and Bay Areas are the West Coast's largest advertising markets (commonly referred to as "major media markets") and consequently competition for subscribers, listeners and viewers is very keen; that competition often generates a pressure that influences coverage style and tone.

The suburbanite board member can name some of those urban media (especially if there has been trouble in the suburban school district recently!), the names of some suburban cable and UHF companies, local radio stations, and daily and weekly newspapers. Cities in the Central Valley pick up some of the network TV stations from the big cities and supplement their list with local stations and periodicals. In districts far from the heavily populated areas, board members get peripheral coverage from the nearest city and may also be covered in detail by small local dailies or weeklies. The latter often depend heavily on schools for their local news and story content and may therefore seem more positive and generous with their school stories.

Wherever you live you should know your district's coverage: Which media are reporting on your schools, and in what degree of detail and with what frequency do they balance the negative news with success stories? Some districts may have reporters assigned exclusively to their activities, and they become as familiar as one of the district staff. Other boards may never see the same reporter twice and may be in the unpleasant position of having to do basic training in the fine art of covering the complexities of education every time they deal with a reporter.

Regardless of the size, expertise and coverage intensity of the media you deal with, you will be more effective if you recognize their organizational structure, procedures and limitations.

Part 1
Newspapers

Most of the big-city newspapers and a substantial number of the suburban and small-city dailies belong to large chains, and the trend is growing as major publishing companies buy up small newspapers. News coverage usually reflects the change when such a merger takes place: There is ordinarily increased emphasis on world and state news from the chain's news bureaus and from the wire services, Associated Press and United Press International. Local editors and reporters add local stories to the copy that comes in from those outside sources.

Chapter 1
Newspaper Staff Members

Beat Reporters

On large daily papers there are "beat" reporters who specialize in writing about specific subjects such as city or county government, business, sports or religion. There is usually someone assigned to deal exclusively with education. Such reporters are specialists once they've been covering their beat for a while, and they should be respected as such. They know legislation, local policies, practices and procedures, and are aware of the quickest, most reliable sources of information, be they board members, administrators or union leaders.

Education writers may write in-depth articles

- Analyzing state trends in education.
- Comparing treatment of basic problems in several districts or at different levels.
- Discussing implications of area demographics on schools.
- Explaining the impact of program changes, financial problems, board decisions.
- Reflecting community attitudes toward schools or programs.
- Exploring creative programs and ideas being tried in local schools.
- Introducing influential or interesting people in education.
- Reviewing whatever issues and topics the reporter or an editor may see as potentially interesting to the reader.

Some of the very large newspapers have education editors who head up teams of reporters. They assign the education writers to coordinate coverage of multiple local districts, private schools, colleges, universities, federal programs, and educational legislation.

Where does *your* district fit in the overview? Have you studied educational coverage to develop a perspective of your district's relative importance to the paper's total educational picture? Have you talked to the education editor about the paper's coverage priorities? Has your staff been briefed about the kinds of stories the paper may use?

Area Reporters

Newspapers which cover large geographical areas may assign reporters to specific regions of that area. Urban papers often do that with their various suburbs, and then produce several issues which

are essentially the same but with different suburban pages. The area reporters must cover *all* of the news for their assigned region, education being just one of the topics along with city and county government, police and crime, human interest, business, deaths, recreational activities and whatever else the reporters and/or editors may consider to be of concern to readers of the area. If a story is judged newsworthy to communities beyond the local area, it may be moved into the general news pages to reach all readers.

Area reporters may get to know the local school district pretty well after a time, but it's difficult for them to keep up with day-to-day activities because they are assigned such a broad range of topics. During a period when the city council is thrashing out some street improvement program or sewer bond election, a local reporter may well lose sight of some development in your school district and need some help catching up when that development is ready to break. It's the school district's responsibility to help area reporters get the background information and updates that they need when they can't touch bases every day.

Do you have a trained staff member assigned to serve as media liaison? Has that staff member's function been clearly defined to media representatives and district personnel? Does your district regularly mail board meeting agendas, backup information and minutes? Does your communication plan provide for weekly news tips about district activities? Does your staff hold news conferences about important issues to give reporters a chance to ask questions?

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Editors

Newspaper staffs may range in number from 10 to 2000, and in addition to the education writers and editors and area reporters there are others who can have profound effects on school coverage. How tight a rein is kept on reporters will vary from one newspaper to another.

- The publisher heads the entire operation which consists of three departments: editorial (written content), business (advertising and subscription), and mechanical (printing and delivery).
- The editor-in-chief (usually called just "the editor") heads up the editorial department or that part of the staff which determines the content of the paper.
- A bank of lesser editors (sports, society, city, news, business, education, suburban) helps determine editorial policy as well as supervise specific sections of the paper.
- The news director directs the total news staff.
- The city editor supervises the *local* news.

Depending on its size, the newspaper(s) covering your school

district may have any combination of the above plus others, or it may combine responsibilities to the point where one or two people are in charge of collecting, writing, editing and printing the whole paper. Thus, the above definitions vary from paper to paper.

The larger newspapers usually have a copy desk across which all editorial copy (written material) must pass for final editing and to have a headline attached. That's a point to be noted: Reporters do not write the headlines for their stories.

Reporters have no control over whether one of their stories is cut or changed by an editor. They are often as disturbed as the reader, particularly if a change results in an unbalanced presentation of a controversial issue.

Editing under the pressure of deadlines is bound to result in occasional errors or misinterpretations, however, and it's important for board members to recognize that reporters may not be responsible for a disappointing article and to find out before accusing them of inaccuracies. Once you get to know a reporter, you may even find that he or she will call you first to explain how, why or by whom a change was made in a story. Reporters value their contacts, and they ordinarily will work hard to maintain your trust.

Space has become a major consideration for all newspaper editors now that the cost of newsprint — the once-cheap paper on which newspapers are printed — has skyrocketed in price. The newspaper's business department determines the space to be allocated to advertising (usually from 50 percent to 70 percent), then lets the editorial staff know how many column inches they have to work with and where those inches are located in the upcoming edition. With such predetermined space limitations, decisions about what will and will not be printed are inevitable, and cutting articles to fit the space available is standard procedure. So is throwing out whole stories, particularly on days when there is a great deal of news competing for that limited space — even back on page 39.

It is not unusual for a member of a board of education to feel that a story about a pilot math program in Alexander Elementary School should be heralded on page one and for the city editor to decide that the only people who could possibly care about the subject are the parents of school-age students living in the Alexander attendance area. That's what makes newspapers and ball games.

Thus, if you are persuasive enough to influence the tone or content of an article about your schools when you talk to a reporter, remember that there are layers through which the copy must pass, and each has potential for editorial change or deletion.

Chapter 2
Types of Coverage

Special Sections

There is no "education page" in our newspapers, so schools are covered in the general news section, but you should keep in mind that some of the most positive coverage appears in the special sections. Sports pages, for example, usually devote a substantial amount of space to school athletics. Remember the sports editors and writers when you want to pass out praise to your coaches and boosters or when your news or special story has something to do with physical fitness or athletics. Also, courses that involve or are of interest to local businesses may well be welcomed by the editor or writers of the business page.

Make sure that you understand the referral procedures of your paper before you contact other than the education writer or the beat reporter assigned to cover your district. You may be tempted to try an end run when the reporter assigned to write about your schools isn't doing what you consider a fair job covering your programs. You may be even more tempted if you have a personal contact in another department, but it's also potentially as dangerous. If you have a healthy working relationship with the beat reporter, you may be able to suggest to him or her that the business editor or the sports writer might be interested in a specific item. The chemistry between reporters and their district contacts can have a lot of influence on how such a suggestion is accepted. A reporter's level of security with his or her boss(es) and colleagues may also influence feelings about having someone else deal with what the reporter may consider "my territory."

News

Anyone dealing with the media must understand clearly the difference between spot news and feature coverage. Spot news (also called breaking, cracking, deadline or action news) is of general interest and is the kind that just happens, such as fires, riots, earthquakes, plane crashes. It also includes coverage of activities scheduled in advance but with anticipated outcomes, such as elections and meetings at which decisions are made. The results are news because they are timely announcements of awaited results.

One does not control *news*. It happens and is covered by reporters. Sometimes the district will want to make an announcement about an activity, a decision or policy change. If there are many media representatives to notify, they should be sent news

releases. If there are only a few, telephone calls may be preferable — particularly if urgency is involved or if reporters may need to ask questions.

Providing background conferences to give reporters insight into board issues *before* the scheduled decision meetings can be a good idea. Some boards are reluctant to spell things out to reporters in advance, but the advantage is that the writer then gets a chance to write about the *issue* rather than the controversy or crowd reaction, which often becomes the focal point of a spot news report after a meeting. Advance coverage of your board's viewpoint may be the only chance there is to get an issue before the public without melodrama. Staffs should be encouraged to hold briefing meetings *before* board members are called upon to vote.

As a board member you may often be called upon without warning to provide background information, comments, reactions to or evaluations of breaking news. That breaking news is the kind that brings grief more often than not. It requires the coolest treatment and often provokes the hottest reaction. The spontaneous aspect of breaking news can easily dispel a board member's intention not to speak "for the board": there isn't time to organize an official answer, but letting an item go to press without any reaction from the district seems unfair.

Breaking news can make you think in retrospect, "That reporter put me on the spot." That's when it's important to remember that reporters don't *make* the news; they just report it. Breaking news is, in short, the kind of news that can make your official communications program the most valuable document your district owns, because it provides guidelines and training for responding to all segments of the public — including reporters.

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Features

Feature stories are the kind of school coverage that most board members would love to see more often. They are stories about interesting activities, programs, people, projects or ideas. They may require a lot of time to research and write, and a subject that may spark one reporter's creativity may leave another one disinterested. Some writers are very skillful at preparing feature material and prefer it to breaking news. Others feel more at home with the latter. It's important for you to know your regular reporters' strengths, weaknesses and preferences. Some newspapers that do not have sufficient staff to allow reporters the time to do much feature writing may welcome having district personnel write stories. If you have a staff member trained to write news copy, the paper may print it as written and may even agree to publish a regular weekly column about school news.

The individual differences among reporters and their newspapers' attitudes will have some bearing on the number of feature stories they produce and carry, but it is worth a try to get a feature story written when you have what you consider a stimulating idea:

- Think out the most interesting points about the potential story, and be ready to present them with enthusiasm and convincing ideas about *why* it would make a good story.
- Take into consideration the peculiar interests, skills and reliability of all the reporters you know. Also consider the circulations of their papers and the types of coverage they offer.
- Suggest an idea to a reporter. Ask if he or she is interested, and if the answer is, "Yes," it's exclusively his or hers.
- After a reasonable amount of time ("reasonable" depending on the amount of activity in your district that demands breaking news coverage, how much research the reporter will need to do, and whether or not he or she is due to go off on vacation or becomes ill), ask if the reporter still plans to write the story. As long as the answer remains positive, the story remains an exclusive.
- Offer to write the story or a background piece for the busy reporter to rewrite or edit.
- If an unreasonable amount of time passes, inform that reporter that you'd like to offer the idea to someone else, then do so.

If you do stimulate a reporter into writing a feature story, great, but be sure that in all fairness you offer something to other media too.

Letters to the Editor

An often overlooked means of getting something into the newspaper (the only *sure* way is to buy an ad) is to write a letter to the editor. Such letters should be brief, clear, of general interest and in compliance with the paper's policies — which usually require that letters be signed but stipulate that names can be withheld for valid reasons such as personal safety.

Public officials often want to take issue with something which has been printed about themselves or their agency. That can be a mistake. A serious one. By reintroducing the subject you can call to the attention of the readers who missed the original article exactly what you wished you hadn't said. That is not to say that board members should never write a letter to an editor nor that they should prohibit their staffs from ever doing so. However, the district's communication policy should spell out which occasions do and do not warrant response. For example, to write to correct facts and figures and to offer supplemental information is a good idea. To take issue with someone's previously stated opinion or to offer information in an emotional tone is always a bad idea.

Letters to the editor are a perfect vehicle for parents and community members who want to express support for a school program, employee or board member, or who want the newspaper to know that they feel the schools have not received fair coverage. The public can say it; board members and staff members cannot without sounding defensive. Board members should encourage citizens who contact them to share their opinions with the editor.

Guest Editorials

Many newspapers carry guest editorials. Sometimes their policy is to locate subjects or authors themselves. Some encourage readers to submit articles on subjects of their own choice. Such opportunities are golden for promoting school successes, explaining problems, and focusing attention on needs. Guidelines governing submission of articles should be included in the district's communication plan. If an individual board member prepares a guest editorial, fellow board members should be made aware in advance. Identification of the author should spell out whether the editorial is representing an individual point of view or that of the board.

The importance of board members communicating clearly and effectively is obvious, but for an article prepared for general publication to be *very* well written is doubly important. In addition to the negative impact a poorly written piece could have on the author's image, a loosely-worded statement which invites misinterpretation or which gives an incorrect perception may take years to correct. Items for publication should be "run by" a number of people to screen out any such possibilities — and the "number of people" should increase in direct proportion to the sensitivity of the subject matter. Have staff specialists check facts. Be sure other board members read or hear it. Test it on some friends in the community, board members from another district, students, union representatives or anyone else who might have a stake in the issue at hand.

Columns

Another potential avenue for promoting programs or ideas about schools is newspaper columns. Mention by a popular columnist is worth thousands of dollars of publicity and can do more toward building identity or speading an idea than a whole story on an inner page among other items of moderate or specialized interest. Not many people read a newspaper from cover to cover, but a popular column is read even when the dedicated fan doesn't have time to read anything else.

Get to know the columns that are carried in the newspapers that cover your district, and watch for a chance to provide their writers with the kinds of news bits they tend to use. Before making contact, practice telling the anecdote or stressing the points to which you think the columnist may respond. If the writer reacts to the story as you tell it, it is far more likely to appear in his or her column.

Cartoons

Most cartoons and comics are syndicated or produced by professionals on the staffs of the major publications which may have union restrictions on art work and photographs, but some newspapers will accept well-done, camera ready artwork. If you are lucky enough to have both an editor who can and will accept such contributions and an artist who can capture the essence of an idea or moment, capitalize on your good fortune. One such depiction can end up on every bulletin board in town and be remembered for life. It's quick, easy to read, and communicates with punch.

Photographs

The old saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words," is as true in this day of data processing as it was when it was coined. The one change that might be made in the cliche' *is*, "An *effective* picture is worth a thousand words." Addition of that word disqualifies a substantial number of photographs. News photography is the kind that tells a story. It may depict pain, joy, activity, loneliness — something to which the reader can relate. It is not a mug shot or head shot or portrait. Photos of people passing out awards or checks are deadly. Getting a picture of a who'e class into the paper may make the children and their parents happy, but it is *not* good journalism. On the other hand, the closeup that shows one child's intense concentration on a butterfly says, "This is learning."

Educators and school board members are ordinarily very people-oriented and they like to give positive feelings, so they tend to want "recognition" types of stories and pictures. It is important to keep in mind the purpose of the media — to report news — when we judge their use of pictures as well as their story content. Let the photographer compose the picture, and don't try to "get everybody in" or "get a more flattering pose."

Some newspapers will accept clear, sharply contrasted black-and-white photographs for publication. Others will not. Familiarize yourself with the practices of the local papers, and if they will accept pictures and you have access to a camera (even a Polaroid may be accepted by some) and a good photographer, you have opened another potential for coverage.

Chapter 3
Types of Local Papers

Small Dailies and Weeklies

School board members who live in small towns or in rural areas where there is a small locally-owned newspaper may have a media advantage over urban and suburban counterparts. Such publications may come out every day, two or three times a week, or only once a week, but they are usually dedicated almost entirely to local news and stories. They usually have small staffs. Such newspapers are often very interested in school news, and if your board has access to the services of someone who can write well, you may have articles printed exactly as you submit them — assuming, of course, that they *are* well written: balanced, newsworthy and not puffery.

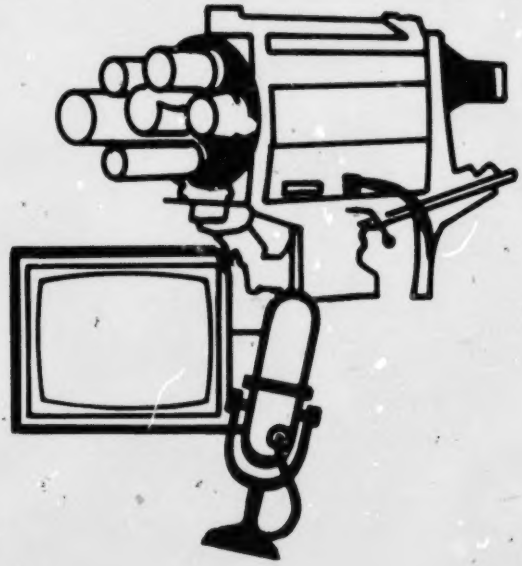
Local, small-town papers often have a homey, supportive tone about local schools, and they may print student work and, without urging, cover every activity the local schools sponsor. "Hometown" items that wouldn't be considered newsworthy in the competition for space in more populated circulation areas are acceptable as "news."

Keep in mind that newspapers with limited circulations are used by the major newspapers, radio stations and television reporters for story ideas. If it provokes interest, a good writeup in a small newspaper is often picked up for a feature in a medium with a larger audience. High school student newspapers, staff and parent newsletters, pamphlets, annual reports and other district publications can spark story ideas, too.

Advertisers

Many communities have one or more "throwaways," "advertisers," or "shoppers," which are publications supported entirely by advertisements and distributed free throughout a designated area. Articles prepared by school personnel may be used wholly or adapted, but chances are good that they will be used. Although many people do not consider advertising circulars legitimate newspapers, they are another vehicle for getting school news before the public.

Part 2
Radio & Television



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Radio and television reporters have the same essential goal as do those who work for newspapers: to report the news interestingly and honestly. The big difference is in the tools they use. Radio and television work with *time* rather than *space*. Radio stresses the aural sense, and television utilizes both the aural and visual senses;

therefore, you should keep these senses in mind as you prepare to deal with their reporters. Some aspects of dealing with media representatives are common to all: their attitude of professionalism; their need for understanding of the limitations, capabilities, and deadlines of their medium; the importance of a cooperative attitude when you provide background information or commentary; and hopefully, your knowledge of their organization and how it works. What has already been said about establishing a tone of cooperation with newspaper reporters applies to radio and television as well.

You'll find as wide a variety of structures in radio and television companies as you do in newspapers: some have staffs of thousands (including program directors, news directors, area reporters, anchor people, producers, engineers) and others have only three or four who do the whole thing, from scheduling programming to checking transmitter readings to answering the mail. (The latter would be a non-union operation, probably located outside the major market areas.)

Each station also has it own unique character, special programs and personalities. As board members you should be familiar with the program formats and personnel of the stations which serve your school area. Listen to the radio and television talk shows and develop a feeling for the kinds of questions the moderators or hosts and hostesses ask. Get to know their styles. Do the same kind of analysis with the news reporters. Do they "rip and read" — the common nomenclature for rewriting and reading what was in the latest edition of the newspaper — instead of going out after the story personally? If so, then the newspaper reporters may have an even greater impact on public opinion than their circulation figures indicate.

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If you live in an area that has access to radio and/or television coverage, don't overlook their many advantages:

- The ability to hear the human voice and/or to see the person to whom one is listening makes these media more human, warmer, more personal. They can be more effective, therefore, in dealing with sensitive issues. A calm explanation of an emotional issue does wonders to diffuse tensions.
- They are faster than newspapers.
- They have the potential for two-way communication if arrangements can be made for audience call-in, and two-way communication is always preferable.
- A live debate can be more interesting, informative and stimulating than a written treatment of two sides of any issue.
- The most effective kind of communication is eyeball-to-eyeball.

As one moves from that face-to-face exchange, one's ability to persuade is diminished. Radio and television are substantially closer to the eyeball-to-eyeball ideal than the printed page.

- The Federal Communications Commission's regulations require that radio and television stations carry public service programs in order to maintain their licenses. If you can help them fill their requirements with interesting, relevant material about education, everyone wins.
- Broadcasting school board meetings can be a real service to the entire community. However, if you fear that special-interest groups would try to "use" such broadcasts to influence the listening audience by staging speeches and demonstrations, you have a legitimate concern. That happens, but well structured agendas and clearly defined procedures can minimize that hazard, and the public service aspect and the perception of openness projected to the community can be very beneficial to both the public and the board.

Learn what radio and television facilities are available within your district (don't forget high school and college stations) and be sure that your district communication plan makes effective use of them.

Chapter 1
Opportunities In Radio

Radio News

Radio news is the fastest way to get word to the public about any event. News can be phoned to the radio newsroom and put on the air right from the telephone for an eyewitness report. Radio reporters also use "actualities," or taped comments by people in authority or with special knowledge on some newsworthy event. Board of education memoers may be asked to comment right from their homes the morning after a board meeting or during a crisis to give an otherwide dull report some life, interest and credibility.

If you are asked to cut a tape, the reporter will have the engineer "get a level" on your voice; in the case of a small local station, the reporter may also be running the machines. In this procedure, the volume of the incoming voice is adjusted so that it is not too loud or soft in comparison to the other voices being aired — so talk normally.

Your answers to questions or background statements (reporters may ask for either or both depending on the story) should be brief, and limited to the point being discussed: That makes it easier for the reporter to "edit" or lift your comments out of the total conversation for airing. The brief excerpts are "carted" (put on cartridges) in the order they will be used in the broadcast.

One of the most frequent errors people make when providing an actuality is trying to include everything about a subject. Radio is a vignette medium when it comes to news and the reporter will be giving the background. If you feel obliged to explain or elaborate, do so after your statement, as information for the reporter. The background information you provide may be broadcast if the reporter feels it's important enough, but the first goal is to address the specific point raised.

To help you be precise in your statements, pause briefly and identify clearly in your mind the main point you want to make. Then say it. In ordinary conversation we often "ramble" along as we gather our thoughts. In contrast, an actuality should be crisp, without frayed or rambling edges. You may feel it is "choppy" not to lead from one point into the next, but the reporter will do that, and your pauses while you are thinking will be edited out of the tape.

The best approach is to relax, but that is easier said than done. Broadcasters often do voice exercises to loosen up the vocal chords before going on the air — sort of a non-liquid gargling of vowels. They also stretch their lips and tongues, do tongue twisters, take

deep breaths using diaphramatic breathing, and practice breath control exercises. You might try such exercises, but first you'd better use the telephone "hold" button or put your hand over the mouthpiece and explain to your family or co-workers what you're doing.

Probably the best way to become proficient at doing actualities is to get a tape recorder and ask someone to play reporter. Insist that he or she bore in on you with questions, and as you pause to reflect and collect your thoughts, and answer again and again, you will develop a feeling for timing, format and the fact that you are being recorded. As it feels more comfortable, your discomfort lessens, and your mind concentrates on the "what" of your comments rather than being distracted by the "how."

Interviews

You may be asked to appear as guest on an interview or talk show. Should that happen, try to listen to the show beforehand — preferably several times so you can judge how the host or hostess deals with different guests. Once you have identified the format and style of the show, you're less likely to encounter surprises during your own interview.

Insist that the parameters of the subject matter to be discussed be identified in advance, but don't make the mistake of telling everything you know about the topic to the host before showtime. If you do, your delivery will lack spontaneity. Another pitfall is that guests who elaborate on all the details and give all their examples before showtime are apt to use such phrases as, "As I said before . . ." or, "As I told you . . ." when they're on the air. Also, the interviewer may neglect to delve in on important points because he or she has been made aware of them and therefore unconsciously categorizes them as common knowledge even though he or she just learned them. Many interviewers won't let their guests talk much about the subject at hand before they go on the air because of this tendency for inexperienced guests to "shoot their wad" off the air, then go dumb when the microphones are turned on, leaving the program flat. Talk to loosen up, yes, but talk to the interviewer about other subjects or provide background information to establish a comfortable relationship, *not* to cover the subject.

If interviewers have little background in the subject you are to discuss, try to fill them in sometime before the day of the broadcast, perhaps by sending some background materials, but don't overdo it. They don't have to be experts. If you must explain a point about your schools that you are going to have to explain again to the audience just a few minutes hence, try to think of a different example or a different way of approaching the same subject. Practice does not make perfect when a natural, conversational

presentation is the goal. Needless to say, written answers being read over the air are deadly anytime, unless you are a trained interpretative reader.

Skilled interviewers are at ease on the air and strive to make their guest feel at ease, too. They usually ask guests to arrive at the studio well before air time to be sure that there is time to get aquainted, have a cup of coffee, a tour of the facility, a chance to meet the engineer and other staff members, review the show's format and ask questions. Such veterans are not looking for on-the-air surprises, nor are they interested in creating any for their guests. Their emphasis is on providing a clear understanding of the interview topic, be it contested school closures or an annual parade or open house.

Should you be the topic of a personal interview, an experienced interviewer will make every effort to offer you opportunities to elaborate on interpretations of issues and to present ideas in your own, natural way. You can expect and welcome probing questions because answering them will allow you to clarify important issues; a competent interviewer will ask such questions in unemotional, non-judgemental terms.

Occasionally you may find an interviewer whose main goal is to put guests on the spot. Such an abrasive interviewer does not ordinarily last very long on the air because the number of people willing to be grilled in public is exhausted quickly, and the reputation for such intimidating techniques spreads fast!

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Inexperienced or insecure interviewers can be even more of a challenge: Instead of annoying an audience by "putting down" a guest, the novice (who often tries to pump a guest before air time to become an instant expert) may have to be corrected on the air, try to do all the talking, or, even worse, may unwittingly force the interviewee to assume the lead position. Unless that is done tactfully, the guest can end up looking aggressive, dominating or even ruthless.

Call-In Shows

Should you have an opportunity to participate in a call-in interview — one during which members of the listening audience can talk to you, ask questions, or offer suggestions over the phone or from the audience — there are several things to consider carefully: 1) It is a good vehicle for educating the public, 2) you have an opportunity to get an indication of what the general public wants to know and needs to have reiterated or reinforced, and 3) you can reinforce your own image as being knowledgeable, open, and not only willing, but eager to dialogue with your constituency.

The advantages are not worth the risks, however, if there are very volatile issues at stake or if negotiations are under way. Although the time for candidness and public discussion is *always* and board

members should be ever alert to opportunities for such exchang you must take extra care during crisis situations to anticipate trouble. To overlook possibilities for organized efforts to disrupt a program by jamming lines with attacking callers, packing the audience with jeerers and booers, or even picketing the station, could turn your informational program into a news item. The timing of a debate-type show can be equally as sensitive: Be sure that the risks are carefully thought through and weighed against the advantages before you accept an invitation to participate in a program that could be used against the district, the board or you as an individual.

Public Service Programs

The Federal Communications Commission requires that all radio stations provide free (or unsponsored) time for the good of the general public. Stations do that in a number of ways, such as covering local issues via discussion programs, sponsoring public forums, allowing citizens to express their opinions on the air, and making brief announcements about local activities, issues and needs. The latter are called Public Service Announcements, or PSA's.

You will want to explore the policies of your local stations on public service broadcasting. For example, you might ask the following questions relating to PSA's:

- How long do they usually allow them to be? (This can vary according to the station's format.)
- How do they prefer to have the announcements written? (Some want all capital letters, centered on the page, triple spaced. Some don't care.)
- Do station announcers do all PSA's live, or can they be pretaped (like a commercial) by someone else? (Having a student or parent or employee speak about an upcoming program or opportunity, for example, could be most effective.)
- How many times will the station broadcast an announcement?
- How much lead time (advance notice) do stations need to get a PSA on their logs (broadcast schedules)?
- To whom should PSA's be sent at each station?
- What types of comments will they allow? (Some local stations will broadcast job announcements for public agencies. Others won't.)

Once aware of the possibilities of local public service announcements, board members can determine how they can best be used to benefit education, and encourage staff through the district's communication plan to make the most of them.

Chapter 2
What About Television?

There are more similarities than differences between dealing with television reporters and newspaper and radio representatives, but the differences are endemic to the medium and must always be kept in mind:

- Television necessarily emphasizes the visual aspects of news, and that influences both the coverage selection and emphasis: vandalism is visual, reading is not; pickets are visual, correcting papers is not; dissention at a public board meeting is visual and aural, agreement is not.
- The expense of television makes it practical to cover only the most unusual or important issues.
- Television crews often use the other media as sources: Valuable staff time is saved if the local reporter (or the station's news or assignment editor) screens out the most promising stories by scanning the local newspaper.

Everyone wants to be on television — or have a favorite event covered by TV — and it is important to recognize the pressures that competition places on TV decision makers: It's even more intense than that placed on newspapers for space. Once a news story does make it onto the airwaves or cable, some viewers may perceive it as incomplete, inadequate or biased because of its brevity or the way the presentation has been edited to depict the most visual or dramatic point. Very few television programs deal with in-depth coverage.

Although TV news and interview shows are handled in basically the same way as those on radio, the presence of that imposing camera in addition to the microphone cannot be ignored. If you are to be interviewed, either for news or on a talk show, try to take a minute before the cameras start to meet not only the interviewer but the camera operators and engineers. Then, once the taping starts (or the show goes on the air if it is being broadcast live), you can continue to include them in your discussion. Your conversation will mainly be directed to the interviewer or reporter, but it's easier to turn to the audience now and then if you talk to the camera crew. They may be on the other side of the bright lights, and you may not be able to see them well, but you *have* met them, and you know that they are there.

Television stations, as well as radio stations, are required by the Federal Communication Commission to provide free time for community affairs. The one-minute editorial or free speech message can be a very effective vehicle for getting a brief message to the public. Each television station has its own procedures, schedules, and methods. Once you have checked them out and decide to go ahead with an announcement, be sure to limit your message to one point. Several messages crammed into too brief a time can be more confusing than enlightening.

In designating the spokesperson for an editorial statement, or for a guest appearance, the board should consider speaker effectiveness. Sometimes you will want a recognized, titled official to do the talking. Other times designating the best speaker available to you may be advantageous. An unfortunate fact is that ego may interfere with the delegation of such responsibility, so that we find a poor speaker giving an important message.

In all official dealings with the media, board members should follow the procedures adopted for implementation of the district's communication plan. Those procedures should have provisions both for designation of board spokespersons and for individual board member participation in media broadcasts and interviews. The plan should also specify responsibilities of staff members regarding media appearances.

If your district has access to videotape equipment, part of board member training sessions on dealing with the media should be mock interviews and a chance to evaluate your own presentations. Leaders in industry and business are staging such training sessions regularly with their top officials — the ones most likely to be put on the spot should some newsworthy event take place. Those companies which are particularly susceptible to public criticism and media review (nuclear plants, oil companies, chemical industries) recognize the importance of their representatives being able to present a positive, reliable image under pressure. Our schools' leaders deserve such opportunities to prepare for the rigors of their roles, and our schools deserve the most effective representatives possible.

If your district has no videotape equipment, community colleges may be able to help or you may be able to arrange such experiences through a local cable or UHF facility during their non-broadcast hours. Regular appearances on their local programming (provided they are doing any since the FCC rescinded requirements for programs of local origin) could also offer board members opportunities to develop camera techniques before local, usually limited

audiences. Be sure to ask people who know you best — such as your colleagues and family — for their reactions to your delivery and appearance on camera. They will be the first to alert you to unnatural mannerisms which could, with exposure, distract from the effectiveness of your delivery.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, you as a board of education member can take two important steps to improve working relationships between your schools and the media:

- Set a positive tone by recognizing the media as allies in communication efforts with the community. Your efforts should include formal adoption of a comprehensive communications plan and provision of guidance and staff development opportunities so employees become familiar with the plan and their roles in its implementation.
- Prepare yourself as an individual by getting to know the local media's procedures, deadlines, and representatives; and by personally developing that feeling of comfort that comes with the knowledge of the media and media equipment.

Appendix

Do's and Don'ts For Laying the Foundation

Do	Don't
1. With the Media	
Publicly proclaim the district's intent to emphasize media relations and follow through with informative letters to editors, publishers and station managers or offer to meet with them to explain upcoming important issues.	Ignore decision-making levels of media organizations.
Identify an articulate, knowledgeable official board spokesperson and let the media know who that person is and how to make contact with him/her at all times.	Automatically assume that the board president should serve as spokesperson — particularly if he or she often cannot be available during business hours or has hard-to-follow speech patterns.
Be generous with your media invitations to district and school functions — social as well as academic.	Treat regular media contacts as outsiders.
Develop a realistic understanding of the media's limitations of time, money and interest priorities.	Expect miracles: An editorial will not change the world; reporters haven't time to spend four days visiting a classroom; there isn't enough newsprint to run a story complete enough to please everyone.
Know your local media's deadlines and respect them.	Leave a reporter on deadline with, "No comment from the district" or an "Unavailable for comment" or a feeling of frustration for having to write or broadcast a one-sided story.
Approach or respond to a reporter as a source of information, not the architect of his or her assignment.	Try to control what is written or how it's presented. That means don't ask to see the copy before it goes to

Do	Don't
	print or hear an edited tape or see the final video version before it's aired.
Make it a point to praise reporters when they do a good job and write to their editors praising outstanding work.	Criticize newspaper reporters for headlines or biased stories until you're sure that *they* are responsible, not someone further along in the procedure who determines what goes into print or over the air waves.
Treat each reporter as the individual that he or she is.	Generalize antagonism towards "the media" or for one reporter against others or expect each writer or broadcaster to have the same abilities and styles.
Treat all media equally. See that conferences are scheduled so that it's not always the morning or afternoon paper or the same radio or TV station that gets the news out first.	Play favorites because one media outlet has a greater audience or is more cooperative than another.
Let reporters know if there are inaccuracies in their stories so that they will discontinue the inaccuracies in future stories. (Good reporters place great value on their accuracy and will appreciate your helping them avoid a second mistake.)	Overact to a printed or broadcast error. You'd be surprised how many of the masses beyond personal friends miss the item completely or don't notice even if they do read it.
Suggest printing or broadcasting a correction in the event of a serious error first to the reporter then to the next in line up the organizational ladder.	Demand a retraction or correction of minor errors. Save that for something important.
2. With District Staff	
Assure an on-going, organized working relationship with the media by adopting a comprehensive plan of internal communication. The plan should spell out procedures for working with the media.	Leave communications to "hit and miss," because there will be more of the latter.
See to it that someone on the staff is assigned the responsibility of implementing the adopted plan and *trained* to do so.	Leave media relations to "whoever happens to be around today," resulting in "run-around," "buck-passing," "no comment" coverage.

Do	Don't
Clearly define the goals of your communications plan and staff's responsibilities for implementing it.	Identify goals without delegating the responsibility and authority to reach them.
Hold a study session about and with the local media for all new board members and staff members who deal with them.	Let otherwise knowledgeable staff members function from a point of ignorance about the media.
Provide your staff members with opportunities to develop communications skills through staff development programs.	Subscribe to the common fallacy that to speak and to write is to communicate.
Identify media relations as a priority and set and maintain a tone of openness, cooperation and accessibility for the whole district.	Down-play or ignore the importance of the "people's right to know" everything about their schools or you may be seen as suspicious, supercilious, negative, defensive and more. (The public perception is "guilty.")
Encourage everyone connected with the district — in any capacity — to furnish ideas and information for media releases and stories and provide an easy way and a constant contact so that they can do so easily.	Discourage staff from participating in the district's efforts to procure coverage for schools.
Insist that staff inform the media when a crisis hits the district.	Let the media find out about a crisis on their own.
Insist that staff generate few news releases, but insist that when they go out that they are well written, timely and distributed fairly.	Blanket media desks with trivia.
Mail news releases selectively: See that they are mailed to all media that can use them, but *not* to the media that won't.	Allow the mailing of a very local topic (like a school assembly) to media with broad coverage — unless it's very unusual. (The *L.A. Times* can't cover school assemblies, but a small daily or weekly might.)

Do	Don't
3. With Yourself	
Work to develop and improve your own personal communication skills: speaking, listening, reacting to others, decision making, conflict resolution, etc., in order to avoid being misquoted, misunderstood, or misrepresented.	Blame a reporter or interviewer for misinterpretation. Never equate talking and hearing with effective speaking and listening or assume "we jus. do that naturally."
Study the local media's styles, organization, and coverage, and be sure that someone on the district staff keeps a clipping file of school coverage and monitors radio and television. Be sensitive to media assignment procedures.	Expect the media to alter their format or change their style to meet your personal preferences.
Establish a business rapport with the reporters who cover the district and if possible the editors, publishers, and broadcast management in order to better cooperate with them.	Presume on acquaintances or friendships. Media personnel are professionals and pulling strings out of the office is akin to asking for medical or legal advice at a cocktail party.
Establish and maintain a good working relationship with media representatives continuously.	Start making contact in the middle of a crisis.
Put yourself in the reporter's job and remind the staff to do so too. Try to see their points of view, respect their opinions, and how you can help them do their job better.	Think of the media as responsible for "telling the school's story" or for communicating for the schools rather than for reporting the news.
Ask your media representatives what they expect from you, how you can cooperate and be helpful.	*Tell* the media what you are going to do for them.
Assume what you say will be used and if you feel uncomfortable with that, be quiet.	Say it if you don't think it will look good in print.
Decline to comment or answer a reporter's question as pleasantly as possible, perhaps explaining, "I may have something to say later, but I want to study the issue first."	Snap a short, "No comment," and seem uncooperative and uninformed.

Do	Don't
Ask a reporter for permission to comment "off the record" if you feel you should explain something for informational reasons.	Say something confidential until the reporter has given you permission to go "off the record."
4. With the Community	
Make background and general educational information easily available and be sure that district staff members do too. That means be generous with budget documents, reports, studies of all kinds.	Assume the attitude, "They should find out for themselves."
Provide ample opportunities for community members to ask about controversial issues, particularly if there is need to influence attitudes, persuade, or convince for acceptance of new ideas.	Depend on the media to influence people's attitudes for you. (Mass media are most effective at reinforcing opinions already held.)
Insist that agenda and background information be jargon free, brief and clear to laymen.	Publish complicated agenda and backup reports.
See that staff provides packets of *all pertinent information* to selected organizational representatives, involved citizens and reporters before every board meeting.	Make people call and ask for agenda backup materials.
Schedule background news conferences before important issues come up for decisions so that reporters can better explain complex issues to the public.	Leave the media to learn the facts as the board is making its decision. Their deadline is imminent, and there's no chance to ask questions.
At public meetings, help reporters present a fair picture by clearly defining both sides of controversial issues and limiting public discussions to the issue at hand.	Provide colorful copy in the form of "an emotional display" or "heated exchange" by making personal remarks or getting visibly upset. Then the news becomes the board member's reactions rather than the issue.
Encourage citizens who praise school programs, staff, or board actions to express their support through their letters to the editors.	Personally respond to negative opinions in print.